MAKING TUTORING STRANGE: THE PEDAGOGICAL AIMS OF TUTOR TRAINING

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"I don't think that we even need this class. Tutoring is really intuitive and the class is pointless." These were the words of a student whose poor performance in our tutor training course meant that she was not invited to serve as a Writing Fellow after the course. As the three-credit course over our 15-week semester was coming to a close and I made my way through annotated bibliographies and research proposals from the other students in the course, I wondered if she was right. Had the course been pointless? As I walked into the Writing Center during a particularly busy time of day and witnessed a dozen small gestures and phrases that made me proud, I thought again of the student's assessment. Was she right?

As the director of a program with strong support and an extensive method of recruitment and training, I understand that there are other tutors who forego an official training course and instead learn by doing. I assume that some excellent tutoring takes place in those centers and with those tutors. So in the course that I teach—where we study the history of composition pedagogy, write evaluations of observed tutoring sessions, host guest lectures in second language learning and tutoring, travel to present at the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing, and conduct local research on our own campus—could I do less with the same results? Is this a waste of time?

In the preface to *Writing Without Teachers*, Peter Elbow writes, "I think teachers learn to be more *useful* when it is clearer that they are not *necessary*" (vii). Elbow argues, here and elsewhere, that "learning is independent of teaching" and that learning to write is more about time spent writing than lessons in writing (xviii). In this vein of thinking and teaching, the teacherless classroom is not only possible—it is preferable. Perhaps the same could be said of the self-guided intuitive tutor.

The training course for Writing Fellows at Clemson borrows from other well-established programs and courses. As my colleague Michael LeMahieu and I were designing the first training course, we drew heavily from the strong program at University of Wisconsin, Madison. The course aims to balance theory and practice, exposing students to the chronology of thinking about writing "labs" so that they understand that the current iteration of the Clemson Writing Center should not be taken for granted. Students read what have become seminal texts in the field of writing center theory and practice: Ben Rafoth's *A Tutor's Guide*; Elizabeth Bouquet's *Noise from the Writing Center*; Shanti Bruce and Ben Rafoth's *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors*. We read composition theory, touching on the key debates and shifts. Students present research on composition textbooks over the past 130 years. We work to understand the ways that meaning is made and that knowledge is constructed, guided by Kenneth Bruffree. The conversations of this course wax philosophical at times, but they always remain grounded in practical application. Students will begin tutoring the following semester, and are driven by a concrete need to know what to do. We thus spend as much time observing tutors and watching and analyzing tutoring film as we spend working through theory. Students voice anxieties, veteran tutors share their experiences, and by the semester's end, a new cadre of Writing Fellows has formed—prepared and confident. If we skipped all of that work, could the tutoring remain as effective?

Early in our course, I ask students to write a Literacy Autobiography. I define the assignment in very loose terms, encouraging students to become aware of literacy's definitions as they choose how to write about their own experiences. The result is a range of reflections and a discussion that leaves most of us feeling even more confused. Generally, someone in the room shares early recollections of parental cuddling and Harry Potter. Sometimes there are reflections on journals and stories that made these students—in elementary school—feel like writers. But always, without fail, there is a teacher responsible in these literacy narratives. And usually, it is a hard teacher. Someone who pushed the student to think harder, to revise, to do more research, to extend their vocabulary. It astounds me, in a post-Peter Elbow world, that every student gives the credit for his or her literacy to a teacher.

After noticing this trend, I mentioned it to the students. Weren't the teachers merely providing a setting for writing and the reading to take place? I tried to convince the students that they were the ones doing the learning and growing. The understanding that emerged from this conversation was summed up

best by a student who said, "I think that it isn't knowing how to write that feels different. It's *knowing* that you know."

As Critical Race Theory spawned Critical Whiteness Studies in the 1990s (not too long after Elbow's teacherless classroom was praised), scholar David Dyer called on scholars of film to *see* whiteness anew. Only then, he argued, can whiteness be stripped of its unearned normative power. In order to see whiteness, Dyer says that we must "make whiteness strange" (9). Although Dyer is writing about social and institutional power, this awareness seems similar to the awareness that my student acknowledged in writing. It is not merely the practice of writing that makes one better, though no one would deny the necessity of practice. For my students to think of themselves as writers, they first had to see the label anew. They had to make writing strange in order for the process and the label to have meaning. They needed to look at writing askance, wrestle a bit with the practice of writing, and question the power of the label "writer." Only then could they claim it. Only then could they *write*.

After an extensive interview process, a select group of exceptional students are chosen to be the new class of Writing Fellows. Each year, ten students are selected from a pool of around 75 applications. By the time that the search committee evaluates and ranks the candidates, we are convinced that these students will thrive, and are eager to have them get to work. At that moment, we begin to think of them as Writing Fellows. They have been chosen, and we name them. Yet, they are not truly tutors.

Perhaps if, at that moment, I threw a few words of caution to the students and asked them to tutor, they would figure it out. Many would tutor beautifully… intuitively, even. I remain convinced, though, that the process of *becoming* a tutor is important. Beyond the interpellation of an object, the training course places the tutor-in-training in the uncomfortable active position, forcing them to see writing as a struggle, to question the right that one has to tutor a peer, to doubt the validity of the Writing Center, and to engage—finally—in the assertion of those rights and the assertion of their claim to that position. The tutor training course should do more than guide intuitive tutors toward their destiny with reassuring articles that are meant to assuage anxiety and confirm instincts. Rather, the tutor training course should make tutoring strange. Only then can students see anew the role of the tutor well enough to actively step into that space.

When my former student doubted the validity of our course on peer tutoring in writing, my feelings were hurt. I felt defensive. I worried that she was right. Ultimately, her insistence that tutoring is intuitive and obvious demonstrated that she was not the right fit for our program. She made evident that she was unwilling to question, to take apart, and to make strange the thing that was clear—as in invisible—to her. She also forced me to see my role as a teacher and Writing Center Director as strange. Her challenge made me *see* my role and more actively embody it.

It may be possible to tutor on intuition. The tutoring that I encourage, and the tutoring that makes me proud, is neither intuitive nor is it the result of teaching, per se. The ability to tutor effectively does not come from reading a particular essay or from engaging in primary research. The tutoring that makes my job feel worthwhile, and makes me feel "useful" (if not "necessary"), is the result of engaged critical thinking. It evolves with each tutoring session and is self-reflexive. The tutoring that I teach cannot be taught. The best tutoring is the result of making tutoring strange. Only then can the tutor embody an identity that had previously been a mere superficial marker.

Works Cited

Dyer, Richard. *White*. Routledge, 1997.

Elbow, Peter. *Writing Without Teachers*. Oxford UP, 1998.